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EXPORTING EDUCATIONAL SERVICES: AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY'S EXPERIENCE IN DELIVERING OFFSHORE PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Keith D. Hampson
BEng (Hons), MBA, PhD (Stanford), LGE, MIEAust, AFAIM,
Director of Research,
School of Construction Management,
Queensland University of Technology,
2 George Street, Brisbane, 4000,
AUSTRALIA

ABSTRACT: Increasingly, Australian universities are facing the challenges of global education. While overseas students studying in Australia provide the primary source of export earnings for educational institutions, a number of institutions, including QUT, are also involved in international trade in educational services by providing services offshore. This paper discusses driving forces behind moves by Australian universities to enter the international education market. It then briefly describes Queensland University of Technology's internationalisation strategy. The paper concludes with a case study describing how the School of Construction Management has pioneered the development of offshore courses at QUT. The introduction of the Master of Project Management and Graduate Diploma of Project Management programs in Singapore in November 1993 represented QUT's first experience in this area. With the experience of 18 months of operation, the School now has the opportunity to reflect on the outcomes of this venture and consider future options.

BACKGROUND

Educational institutions around the world are considering the importance and relevance of internationalisation on a regional and global basis. Different political and economic forces at a macro level may drive internationalisation. In Europe the hegemony of the European Union clearly colours the decision making of tertiary institutions throughout the continent [1]. In the United States it is argued that the development of a truly international curricula is necessary to combat the commercial ascendancy of the countries of East Asia. A common goal expressed, particularly in American literature [2], is to produce graduates who not only are aware of the interconnections in the regions of the world, but are willing to consider a national perspective other than their own. These graduates embody the concept of international higher education in their capacity to function competently in an international environment and in their ability to make personal and public policy decisions as responsible citizens of an international society.

Excellence in research and scholarship has always been measured on an international scale. However this intellectual activity has not always been translated into teaching programs nor has there been much focus on non-Western developments until recent years.

From an economic perspective, with Australia facing balance of payments difficulties during recent years, there is a need to improve our export performance and reduce our import bill [3]. A sustainable improvement in trade performance requires a shift in exports away from agricultural and mineral commodities to a greater reliance on manufactured goods and services.

The Bureau of Industry Economics [3, pvii] reported that *"within the services sector, the export of educational services, particularly at the tertiary level, is widely regarded as having great potential for expansion. The first and more important is the provision of places to overseas students at Australian educational institutions on a fee-paying basis. The second is the provision of educational services overseas."*

The scope for Australia to increase its share of world trade in education was enhanced in 1985 by the Federal Government's decision to allow tertiary education institutions to offer full-fee places to overseas students. This was followed by the 1987 introduction of the Dawkins Plan and the release of the Higher Education Policy Statement in 1988. These measures were designed to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit amongst tertiary institutions. Australian tertiary institutions can now compete freely on the world market overseas [3].

While overseas students studying in Australia now provide the primary source of export earnings for educational institutions, a number of institutions (including QUT) are also involved in international trade in education by providing services offshore.

One of the essential features of our inherited international relationships is that they were almost without exception focused towards the northern hemisphere — to the United Kingdom and the United States of America — and had relatively little connection with Australia's geographical position [4]. This was true in education as it was in virtually all aspects of our existence. These traditional, and often informal networks with the Anglo-American world are now being complemented by formally negotiated linkages with Australia's regional neighbours. This trend reflects the policy-orientations of recent years towards regional alliances and the drive into the region on the part of Australian institutions seeking additional income.

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

The internationalisation phenomenon in tertiary education is not unique to QUT or to Australian universities [5]. QUT regards internationalisation as one of its priority areas. Through teaching, research and community service, QUT contributes to developments in the international sphere and assures the quality of its programs and activities. Indeed, education is seen as a passport for QUT graduates to move within the global community. Student and staff mobility, internationally-oriented curricula, international collaborative scholarship, and the delivery of programs and services offshore are essential elements of developing undergraduates and postgraduates who can contribute to the issues facing the world economy and society.

Until 1995, QUT's international student program resulted in students accounting for approximately 7 percent of the full-time body. While recruitment of international students is, and will remain, a critical factor in QUT's overall operations, it is viewed by senior management of the University to be too narrow to provide a sufficient definition of internationalisation. It is argued that QUT needs to take into account the position that Queensland and Australia occupies in the Asia-Pacific region [5]. QUT's international activity should be evident in curricula, in the delivery of short courses, in international consultancy, and in the involvement of domestic students in international exchange programs throughout the region. An international perspective is seen as part of the learning experience for QUT students and the development of offshore courses is encouraged. The excellence that QUT strives for, as reflected in its corporate slogan - *A University for the Real World* - is now increasingly measured by international rather than purely domestic criteria.

Specific activities targeted to enhance the University's international recognition and reputation include:

- Research collaborations;
- International training and consultancy contracts;
- Exchange connections;
- Encouragement for staff and students to undertake overseas study;
- Delivery of QUT courses offshore;
- Provision of scholarships to international students;
- Internationalisation of the local curriculum;
- Recruitment of international students and staff;
- Active promotion of QUT as a sabbatical option for visiting international academics.

In promoting this international activity, QUT has, amongst other strategies, sought to “*develop flexible attendance and delivery modes to facilitate offshore delivery of QUT accredited courses and to ensure that courses are competitive in length and content without compromising standards*” [5, p3].

CASE STUDY: QUT’s SCHOOL OF CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT

History. Throughout 1993, the School conducted extensive investigations into opportunities for offering for post-graduate courses in various countries in South-East Asia. A demand was established in Singapore for a course in Project Management; no such course was available to students at the time. After negotiations with an established local educational agent in Singapore an agreement was reached whereby the QUT-accredited Master of Project Management and Graduate Diploma in Project Management courses would be offered in Singapore. The Singapore agents were experienced and currently coordinating courses from several other Australian and UK universities in Singapore.

To maintain academic quality, it was a requirement of QUT’s University Academic Board that courses offered in Singapore be virtually identical to those undertaken by students in Australia. To this end, in excess of 50% of the course is taught by QUT-associated staff and control of subject content and assessment rests with QUT. QUT also assures the quality of local Singaporean staff providing the remainder of the lectures through appointment approvals.

Overseas industry bodies are also consulted. For instance, the Construction Industry Development Board and Contractors’ Association in Singapore have endorsed the course.

Enrolments. There are currently 40 Singaporean students enrolled in these postgraduate courses - comprising two separate intakes or cohorts. Of these:

- 25 are enrolled in the Masters course, and
- 15 are enrolled in the Graduate Diploma.

It is anticipated that a further 30 students will formally enrol for the course in November 1995 for the third intake, comprising:

- 15 for the Masters course, and
- 15 for the Graduate Diploma.

The typical Singaporean student is likely to be slightly more senior in employment responsibilities and age than the corresponding Australian student. This may be a function of the increased number of the offshore students receiving financial support from their employers to undertake the postgraduate program.

Course structure and staffing. The structure of the Singapore program allows part-time students to complete a Master of Project Management in three years and a Graduate Diploma in two years. These durations are identical to the Brisbane-based programs. The course structure is essentially identical to that offered locally. Only the part-time mode of attendance is available in Singapore at this stage. To date, teaching of subjects for the first intake students is in the final semester with a graduation ceremony for the Graduate Diploma students tentatively scheduled in Singapore during February 1996.

Courses commence in November each year. This commencement date allows QUT to offer a substantial proportion of the lectures during the Australian semester breaks in order to minimise dislocation of the Brisbane-based teaching programs.

Each subject is typically taught as a two week intensive program with assignments following over the next two months. The School is currently using existing academic staff to teach these offshore courses. Four of the School’s full-time academic staff have completed a number of two-week teaching programs in Singapore. It is the School’s aim to restrict the release of full-time lecturers to

one visit per semester to minimise disruption to home courses. Specific arrangements are made to ensure the quality of service to home students is maintained in the lecturers' absences, for example, in the handling of lectures and administrative loads.

The School is also pursuing the strategy of considering additional adequately qualified part-time lecturing staff to assist in servicing the local and overseas courses. In addition, the School is expanding administrative support through the appointment of staff based in Brisbane to better service this venture and maintain a high level of service to local students.

Reflections to date. Davies [6] highlights the fresh challenges that internationalisation of teaching programs may provide:

- International marketing for students and projects;
- Management of international programs - admission, assessment, student services;
- Design of international and multi-cultural programs;
- Teaching in different languages and/or in different cultural settings;
- Financial management - fee collection, multiple income flows.

These dimensions are now used to structure an evaluation and present additional information regarding the School of Construction Management's offshore teaching venture described above.

Marketing for the offshore program is principally carried out by the School's Singapore-based joint venture partner, with assistance from the School of Construction Management's Brisbane staff as required. This typically takes the form of newspaper and industry journal advertising leading to a series of 'Open Days' at the headquarters of the Singapore agent. Timing of these public 'Open Days' is scheduled to coincide with the presence of at least one of QUT's lecturers. The results of the marketing carried out to date has been satisfactory, providing an ongoing reservoir of personal referrals from satisfied graduating and continuing students. Considerable emphasis is therefore being placed on ensuring the satisfaction of existing students. One issue not yet clarified in the sphere of marketing is the nature of long-term demand for such a course. Early indications suggest that the demand required to satisfy economic viability and maintain educationally sound class sizes is likely to continue for at least the foreseeable short term. Possibilities for progression of a number of successful Masters students to more advanced study with QUT, e.g. doctoral study, has been identified.

Management of the programs is coordinated by the School's Brisbane-based Postgraduate Course Coordinator with assistance from a Program Administrator based in Singapore. Applications for admission are collected by the marketing arm of the Singapore agent and forwarded to the School of Construction Management for processing in conjunction with QUT's Office of International Students. All QUT correspondence with the students is via the agent. Assessment is being systematised to ensure consistency of grading standards between QUT and Singapore-based lecturers. Offshore students are treated as full QUT students and are therefore also administered via QUT's central student records system. This aspect of the venture is satisfactory, but nevertheless requires substantial and rigorous administrative support from Brisbane.

The *international program's course structure* is essentially identical to that offered in Brisbane. (A slightly lesser choice of course electives is offered to maintain economic class sizes.) In practice, the delivery of the subject requires individual fine tuning to take into account the compressed nature of the subject - minimising opportunities for substantial reading exercises between nightly lecture sessions. This problem is alleviated by either forwarding reading requirements a number of weeks prior to the lectures and/or a more direct lecturing format. Experience has demonstrated that Singapore student expectations for a structured teaching program are higher than in Brisbane and adherence to a previously defined program is important. The need for greater certainty may stem from the need for the Singapore students to balance the challenges of postgraduate education with senior employment responsibilities. The possibility of cultural differences concerning the desire for certainty is also being informally evaluated.

Language has not been a substantial hurdle to-date with the courses offered in Singapore. With a sizeable number of the students regularly doing business throughout the region, the international

adoption of English as the language of business has obvious benefits for Australians. The majority of students are fluent in a number of languages — including English. Language is expected to be a greater hurdle in any expansion of similar programs throughout other centres of South East Asia - other than Malaysia. Greater use of local lecturers, or employment of lecturers in Brisbane of the relevant ethnic background may be appropriate to overcome this difficulty.

Cultural issues are important in every classroom, and are especially so in the offshore classrooms. Students in the Singapore classroom comprise ethnic Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian. Steven Covey's recommendation [7] of *"seek first to understand, then be understood"* is well worth remembering in any context. Nevertheless, improvements in the area of cultural sensitivity are always possible. Crossley [8], and Crossley and Broadfoot [9] have drawn attention to the number of educationalists engaged in consultancies in the developing world without training in international education or relevant experience of the cultural contexts in which they work. Additionally Bilbow [10] has drawn attention to the fact that, particularly at the undergraduate level, lectures may pose severe problems for those from non-English speaking backgrounds because of linguistic, discursal and cultural factors. The question of whether all lecturers are able to adequately manage the cultural diversity inherent in these programs currently receives only superficial attention. In future, some form of introductory cultural training program may be appropriate for new lecturers employed in the offshore teaching program.

The *financial management* of a program remote from Brisbane, serviced by relatively infrequent and short teaching visits by a variety QUT lecturers is a continuing challenge. As Davies [6] reflects, *"internationalisation produces considerable challenges for university management. It is, however, likely that dependence on international finances is probably irreversible once started. Nonetheless, the university needs to be wary of sustaining commitment to projects beyond the point where continuing income is questionable. The practical application of product life cycle is probably sensibly borne in mind in this context."* This perceptive observation is also relevant in seeking to determine the longevity of QUT's local programs. Initiatives supporting research and staff development activities in the School of Construction Management are already relying on income generated from offshore sources. Given the limited opportunities for funding the continuation or future expansion of these activities from traditional sources, this type of discretionary expenditure appears inextricably linked to the success of our offshore ventures. Enhanced flexibility of University processes and procedures, for example to allow focused and expeditious course modification, and the opportunity of offering accredited short courses is considered vital to effectively maximise offshore opportunities.

The future. The School of Construction Management has restricted the number of new enrolments to these courses to one intake per year to maintain the quality of the local programs and ensure economically justifiable class sizes in Singapore. It is anticipated that classes of 25 to 30 students will be maintained for at least the next few years.

The expansion of similar postgraduate programs and short courses overseas will take place in concert with the development of more sustainable staffing levels, both academic and administrative. This may be necessary both at the level of the University and the School organisational units. Hanna [11] perceptively observed that *"all organisations are perfectly designed to get the results that they get."* Improved results in the offshore postgraduate education arena are achievable with more focused and committed project management. Balancing today's university demands of academic leadership, teaching performance, research and scholarship, and professional leadership has most career academics in a state of frenzied hyperactivity without the additional and somewhat volatile demands that international expansion entails. Nevertheless, the opportunity to offer additional programs, either in Singapore or elsewhere in South East Asia, is under continual review to identify possibilities for international expansion consistent with maintaining the quality of our Brisbane-based programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Educational institutions around the world are considering the importance and relevance of internationalisation on a regional and global basis. The drive to internationalisation in tertiary education is viewed as an amalgam of political, economic and educational pressures. Australian universities are now facing up to the challenges of global education. Our traditional historical,

cultural and linguistic orientation towards the Anglo-American world is gradually being challenged by the growth of formally negotiated educational linkages between our regional neighbours in the Asia-Pacific.

The Queensland University of Technology regards internationalisation as one of its principle priority areas. International education is seen as a passport for QUT graduates to move freely within the global community. Student and staff mobility, internationally-oriented curricula, international collaborative scholarship, and the delivery of programs and services offshore are essential elements of developing QUT undergraduates and postgraduates who can contribute to issues facing the world economy and society. Davies [6, p13] declares that “..it is vital not to view international activity primarily as a form of cultural or economic imperialism in the academic domain. Unless the university has strong philosophical commitment and belief in internationalism per se, it is likely that it's position will be viewed with scepticism by potential and actual clients.” This philosophical commitment to internationalism will inevitably be tested in the years ahead as Australian educational institutions vie for international status, ‘respectability’, and marketshare offshore.

The School of Construction Management has pioneered the development of offshore postgraduate courses at QUT. The introduction of the Master of Project Management and Graduate Diploma of Project Management programs in Singapore represented QUT's first experience in this area. Initiatives supporting research and staff development activities in the School of Construction Management are already inextricably linked to the success of our offshore ventures. Enhanced flexibility of University processes and procedures together with the opportunity of offering a variety of delivery formats is considered vital to effectively maximise future offshore opportunities. Expansion of overseas programs will take place in concert with the development of more sustainable staffing levels, both academic and administrative, at the level of the University and the School.

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Brief Biography -- Dr. Keith Hampson

Dr. Keith Hampson completed his Bachelor of Civil Engineering with Honours after serving a six year industry cadetship. Following graduation he gained extensive experience in water supply and sewerage, roadworks, port development and marine construction.

In 1987, Dr. Hampson was seconded to a large London-based integrated consultancy, W.S. Atkins & Partners, as part of the Confederation of British Industry Overseas Scholarship Award. He was principally engaged as a member of the multidisciplinary management team supervising construction of the English Channel Tunnel Project. After returning to Australia and a period of private consulting and part-time lecturing, he joined the School of Construction Management at the Queensland University of Technology.

He has since completed an MBA at the QUT, and a PhD in Construction Engineering and Management from Stanford University, California. His doctoral dissertation was jointly supervised by Stanford's School of Engineering and the Graduate School of Management, and entitled *Technology Strategy and Competitive Performance*.

Keith is Director of Research in the School of Construction Management at QUT. His research interests include the management of technology for competitive advantage, international construction, and strategic management.

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